1: Bowen C-4 (1945-1947) 1951 MKE Maritime Arabs MKE

ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIPS

228 426 Pearling is a great gamble for everyone concerned. A share may be worth only 50 or 100 rupees if the take has been poor, but on the average a share should net at least several hundred rupees. It must be remembered that a share usually represents a year's earning, since the pearling industry operates on the "debt system." This is not to be confused with the "truck system," for the workers in the Persian Gulf pearl fisheries are not paid in produce. In the debt system the divers and tenders get actual cash advances during the seasons they are out of work, and their families get food and supplies while they dive. They must pay off their incurred debts with their earnings after the pearling season, but somehow they never seem able to get free.

228 426 672 Until recently, a diver who accepted cash advances from a *nakhoda* had doomed himself to diving until death, and unfortunately death might not be an exit, as his debt was simply passed on to his son or brother, who then went on to incur his own debt. Once in debt a diver is prohibited from hiring to another *nakhoda*—he must repay his debt to the man who gave him cash advances. A diver or anyone else who accepts an advance in the pearling industry has sold himself to economic slavery, for the *nakhoda* owns his ability to work, while the man must support himself. Thus, a diver is bound to return to the purgatory of pearling at the *nakhoda's* call. Since Muslim law prohibits interest or usury the debt system effectively gets around this. The *nakhoda* is usually in turn bound to some merchant in the same way, for he has taken cash advances to give to his divers and attendants.

567 465 In Oman the *nakhodas* often hire their labor from a tribal agent, giving the agent an advance of money and rice. In the case of slaves, the agent takes this to the slaves' master; at the end of the season he collects the balance of the slaves' earnings. Thus the slaves' earnings go completely to his master, who in return clothes and feeds him.

228 656 426 On Bahrein Island the Bahrein Government has, at the suggestion of the British, effected many reforms in the pearling industry with respect to the debt system. Hereditary debts have been abolished; pearl divers on Bahrein now take their debts to

Al Bowen C-6 (1945-1947) 155. MK3 Maritime Arabs MK3

their graves, and justly, too, for diving probably hastened their end. The Government demands that account books be given each diver and that they be kept up properly, and sends inspectors to see that they are. Before the season begins at Bahrein the amount of cash advances is agreed upon and proclaimed. The divers have put up a terrific objection to this limitation, for it seemed to them that they were simply getting less money. They could not understand that their debt was being lowered—in fact they did not care, for hadn't they always been in debt?

There is a "diving court" which enforces the arbitrary laws of the industry, such as those dealing with engagement of labor, taxes, spurious pearls, etc. The court also disposes of any case of a *nakhoda* who cannot pay off his debts; the *nakhoda* may lose his boat and divers, but not his personal property.

There has never been any noticeable effort on the part of the ruling sheikhs to better the lot of their subjects: if they were unemployed for long periods in the winter they would be sure to work harder during the pearling season to pay off their winter's debts. As the local sheikhs levy a tax on every boat and get a cut of some sort on the proceeds, the pearlers in a sense work for them. The sheikh thus always looked on the lack of other employment with favor, for if a man were happily employed as a farmer, fisherman, or herder there would be little incentive to enter the pearling purgatory. Under normal conditions the divers have an eight months' loaf during which time they live off their *nakhoda;* this is to the liking of both the diver and the *nakhoda.*

However, many divers do find other work, as fishermen or mariners. The depression of the thirties hit the Persian Gulf pearl industry with great suddenness. Within a short period tens of thousands of pearlers in the Gulf found themselves without an occupation. The marine stock of Kuwait rose to the situation and gradually shifted to cargo hauling between Kuwait and Basra, Iran, India, South Arabia, and East Africa. Large ocean-going double-ended dhows have carried the fame of Kuwait seamanship throughout the Middle East, sailing to Africa on one monsoon and back on another. Kuwait oil operations have been drawing on this labor supply as well, so that nowadays the

2: Villiers T-5 (1938-39) 1948 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2
Kuwait MI1

missed at least another 600, for no list which the dhows supply is really reliable, and each ship carries many persons who are without European documents. As a new dhow arrives, sometimes dozens of her passengers will drop quietly over the side and disperse themselves among the dhows already in the harbour. As with the disposal of the seamen's ventures, all Arabs take a delight, regardless of their ports of origin, in the general defeat of European regulations.

II

At first glance, the whole deep-sea trade in dhows seems unorganized and almost unregulated. In point of fact, it is very well organized indeed, and has a tradition going back, probably, some thousands of years. There is no association of dhow owners in Arabia as there is a Country Craft Organization on the west coast of India, for the Arab of today is too inherently disunited and fiercely individualist to make this type of co-operation possible. But he can organize his own trade very well, nevertheless. The typical wealthy business family of Kuwait maintains offices, almost always managed by sons of the house who frequently rotate on the circuit, in all the more important centers of Arab coastal trade. The head office is at Kuwait or perhaps Basra, with branches at Aden (in the Crater, not at Steamer Point), Bombay, possibly one other west coast of India port, and Mukalla. Where there is not an actual branch of the family conducting business on a permanent footing, there is either a trusted agent (probably a relative), or one of the younger sons sent in the trading season to watch the family interests. This, for instance, is done at Berbera, in British Somaliland, which, when times are good, can absorb a surprising quantity of Iraqi dates carried there in dhows. The agent or family member is primarily responsible for the collection of debts — always a problem in a trade which is carried on without banking. A family carrying on business on such a scale will have a finger in perhaps a score big dhows, all nominally "owned" by their own *nakhodas*. The cash resources of some of these families must be enormous, and behind them stands the Sheikh of Kuwait, who was a wealthy man even before oil was discovered in his territory.

2. Villers T-8 (1938-39) 1948 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2
Kuwait MI1

MA 471 426 565 When a deep-sea dhow is built, at least some of the money is put up by the *nakhoda* himself and his family. It is the first essential of the *nakhoda* that he should be from a family of standing in the community, which will pay its debts. Just why such families cannot finance a dhow by themselves I was unable to discover, but the Arab, apparently, has no objection to carrying on business under a cumbersome structure of debt. The merchant, backed by the Sheikh or the ruling family, backs the *nakhoda's* family, who support in turn a trusted and experienced member to take command of the dhow.

MA 565 871 857 It is customary for the boys in such families to go to sea while very young, but they never work as sailors. They are always privileged: no sailor can become a deep-sea *nakhoda*, since obviously if his family is of standing, he would never serve before the mast. The children sail with him sometimes from the age of six or seven, though not regularly. They will make one or two long voyages, looking on and learning but not actually doing anything; then they will remain at home a year or two before going out again. They take command very young. Schooling, at least in 1939, was normally restricted to the local Koranic schools, and rarely occupied more than three months in the year. Only merchants' sons went to the colleges of Iraq, Egypt, and Syria.

MA 565 554 505 Gradually the head of a *nakhoda's* family may attain the status of a lesser merchant himself, though his merchandise is generally limited to the wherewithal to build ships, which comes up in his own dhows from the Malabar coast. But a *nakhoda* himself almost never becomes a merchant, and a merchant's son never becomes a *nakhoda*. Nevertheless, the profession of conducting deep-sea dhows about the waters of the Indian Ocean is a highly respected one, and the shipmasters of Kuwait are, on MA [487] the whole, a very competent and knowledgeable class, though few of them can practice much astronomical navigation. Even their long voyages down to Zanzibar or to Calicut are coasting, really down with one monsoon, and back with the other, almost always in sight of land. Their real ability consists in their local knowledge, both of ports and trade.

K MA 505 565 In Kuwait, in 1939 — as now — there were upwards of 10,000 qualified deep-sea sailors. An astonishingly high proportion is of

Negro origin, the descendants of slaves, though not now slaves themselves. Many others are of Iranian origin. Almost none are Bedouin, for the Arab Bedouin is not a seafaring man. In Kuwait, the callings open to the low-class Iranian are restricted to portering, pearling (either as diver or as tender), and sailing. Both Iranians and Negroes work splendidly, are loyal, competent, and well disciplined.

As the *nakhoda* class is tied to the merchant by a structure of debt, so also are the sailors tied to the *nakhoda* class in the same way. All deep-sea sailing is paid for on a shares system, and there are no wages. Often the *nakhoda* of the deep-sea dhow has an interest in a pearling vessel (though not now to anything like the same extent as in former years), and the sailor may be bound to him through pearling debts, either his own or inherited. The more iniquitous practices in the pearling business structure have long been on the way out, largely because of the excellent example set at Bahrein, but the debt tradition stands and is almost impossible to eradicate.

The sailors go to sea because they know no other life, and they make a wretched living by incredibly difficult methods. They have no possessions other than the clothes they stand in, and one or two spare gowns, a good headcloth, and a few sarongs. Their toothbrush is the twig of a tree; their ablutions are made five times daily at a mosque well, or in the sea; they know no shelter and rarely have a bed. The younger seamen, I have noticed, often have no home other than the *suq*, or native bazaar, where they coil down in their rough cloaks for a night's sleep on a bench in a cheap coffee shop, or in the sand. At sea, they stretch out on the deck, beneath the stars, for there is no such thing as accommodation for the seamen or anyone else in most dhows. The officers and the more important merchants live on a bench round the wheel, in the stern of the ship; the seamen lie down anywhere.

What keeps the seaman a disciplined and more or less contented worker is his hope of reward, principally from smuggling or his own ventures, and his ambition to get hold of a tiny shop in the *suq* of his home town. This is an ambition he rarely achieves. His more usual fate is to die young, especially if he be also a pearl diver.

3: Bowen C-4 (1945-1947) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

228 his great toe completely severed by a large piece of faroush that had slipped and hit his foot as he stood on the sea bottom.

Hasa, known to Americans familiar with native construction in Arabia as "sea rock," is found on the sea bottom in more or less solid deposits, from which a diver pries pieces (Fig. 15). Faroush is much more difficult to mine: it takes at least a day to get a boatload, whereas a crew may get three

FIG. 14—Author standing by slabs of *faroush* on the shore of Bahrein Island. Faroush is mined near Bahrein in much larger pieces than in Arabian waters. Pile of *hasa* in right background.

or four boatloads of hasa a day. Faroush is sold by the square measure, hasa by the cubic measure.

228 The rock divers, like the pearl divers, work only in the warmer months. 464 Since they generally work in water that is shallower than the pearl waters 461 and therefore remains warm longer, the mining season is two or three months longer than the pearling season, which is only four months. The rock divers do not work constantly, hour after hour, day in and day out, as the pearl [339 divers do, since each boatload has to be sailed to shore. A small stock pile 317] of faroush and hasa is always maintained in every seaboard town, and most of its buildings are constructed from these two rocks. Lime is made by burning hasa.

● 426 The crews mining coral rock work on the "debt system," notoriously 465 exploited in the Persian Gulf pearling industry. Although they are paid good

wages, they are given cash advances and food during the winter and during slack periods. They never seem able to pay off their debts to the dhow owners.

PEARLING

The most colorful marine industry of the Persian Gulf is pearling.[1] Pearling is definitely a seasonal occupation, confined to the months when

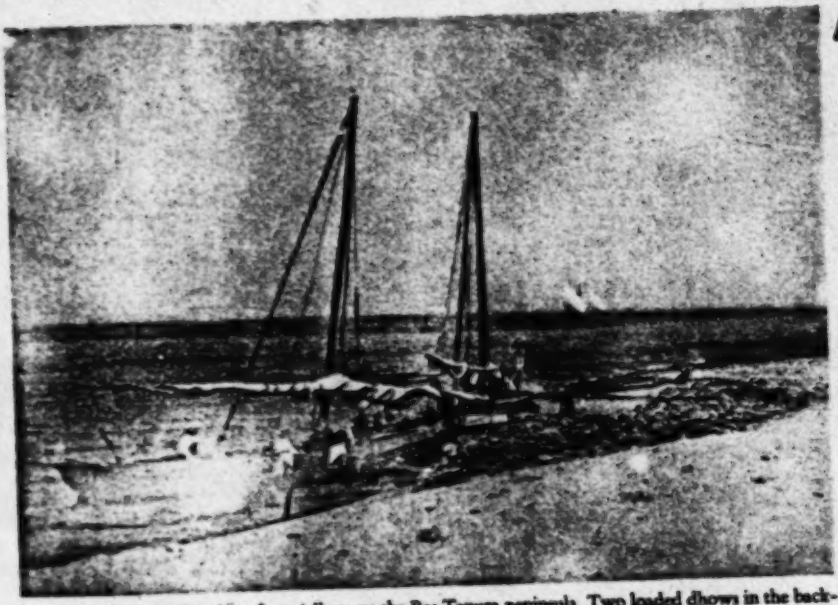

FIG. 15—Unloading hīm from jalbuts on the Ras Tanura peninsula. Two loaded dhows in the background are bringing in more.

the water is warm. On the Persian Gulf coast of Arabia the minimum winter air temperature is in the middle forties, the shallow-sea temperature in the low sixties. From long experience the Arabs have found that they can begin deepwater diving in June and continue until the first week in October. At the start and finish of the season the surface-water temperature is about 85°, but the deep-water temperature is considerably less; the maximum surface-water temperature may exceed 100° in August. Before this main season the *ghaus al-kabir* (great diving), there is a season of about two months known as the *ghaus al-barid* (cold diving), when smaller boats work the shallower waters near their home ports; during the winter many men go out as "waders" at low tide to pick up what they can just below tide level.

[1] See also R. LeB. Bowen, Jr.: The Pearl Fisheries of the Persian Gulf, *Middle East Journ.*, Vol. 5, 1951, pp. 161–180.

228 all end up in Bombay. The Indians drill, polish, and grade the pearls, and
442 string them on silk; these short strands are known as "Bombay bunches."
439 Before World War II the pearls were sent to India by streamer; today they
509 are usually sent by air from Bahrein, Kuweit, Sharjah, and Dharan. The pearls are usually sold to Indian merchants in these towns, but occasionally the Arabs themselves take the pearls to Bombay.

228 After all the pearls have been sold, the nakhoda figures out the season's
465 profit. The owner of the dhows gets half the profit; the other half is divided among the crew. Most of the pearling dhows out of Saudi Arabian ports are small (not more than 40 feet), with crews of ten -- six divers and four attendants -- in addition to the nakhoda. Each diver and each attendant gets one share in the profits (about 4 per cent); the nakhoda gets two shares, unless he owns the dhow and longboat, in which case, of course, he gets more than half the profit. The number of shares each of the crew, the nakhoda, and the owner get is agreed on at the beginning of the season and may vary from place to place. Many of the pearling dhows out of Kuweit and Bahrein are considerably larger than those out of the Saudi Arabian ports and may have crews of forty or more; on these the nakhoda gets a larger number of shares.

Pearling is a gamble for everyone concerned, from the merchants to the divers. Some seasons are good, some bad; sometimes a boat has bad luck, sometimes excellent luck. A share on a pearling dhow should be worth several hundred rupees, but it may not be worth fifty.

228 Usually a share on a pearling dhow represents a year's wages, since the
426 pearling industry operates under the "debt system" mentioned above (not to be confused with the "truck system" of pearl fisheries elsewhere, in which the divers are paid off in produce). Under the debt system the divers and attendants are given cash advances during the winter season, when they are not working, and their families are given food and supplies while the season is on. The advances are deducted from their calculated shares, so that usually the worker gets little or nothing.

Thus the divers and attendants are perpetually in debt. Once a worker is in debt to a nakhoda, he cannot work for anyone else during the pearling season; this is one of the laws of the industry. He has virtually sold himself into economic slavery to the nakhoda, who has his services and never actually has to pay him anything, whereas he in effect pays the nakhoda in the pearls he produces. However, it should be remembered that the nakhoda is in turn usually in debt to some merchant, who commonly finances numerous nakhodas.

2: Bowen C-4 (1945-1947) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

On Bahrein and in Kuweit the governments have made reforms in the pearling industry. On Bahrein a pearl diver's debts now die with him; in other places a diver's debts are passed on to his son or brother. The Bahrein government also demands that account books be kept for each diver, and the cash advances are agreed upon at the beginning of the season.

However, there has been a drastic change in the Persian Gulf pearling industry. The great depression after World War I and the competition from Japanese cultured pearls dealt the pearl fisheries a serious blow. Twenty-five years ago there were nearly three thousand dhows engaged in pearling in the Persian Gulf; today there are not more than six hundred. In the twenties the east-coast ports of Saudi Arabia probably sent several hundred boats to the pearl fisheries annually; today there are not more than several dozen. In the twenties the value of the Persian Gulf pearl fisheries was more than a million dollars; today it is less than a quarter of a million.

Thousands of divers and attendants were thrown out of work. In Kuweit numerous pearlers found employment on sailing ships traveling to India and Africa. On Bahrein Island many were absorbed by the rapidly expanding oil industry. In Saudi Arabia oil development came late, and the unemployed pearlers had already been absorbed as fishermen, rock miners, and farmers; in fact, so well adjusted were the Saudi Arabian towns that when the Arabian American Oil Company needed large amounts of labor in 1945, it had to hire Bedouins from the desert. Oil came late to Kuweit also; however, here workers were drawn from the marine industries, since the Kuweit Oil Company paid higher wages than the workers could get as sailors, pearlers, or fishermen.

Oil has thus been able to offer salvation to the lowly coastal worker of the Persian Gulf. A man in debt can now get a job with an oil company and pay off his debt. So effective has this proved that the Kuweit, Bahrein, and Saudi Arabian nakhodas have difficulty in getting men to send to the pearl fisheries, or to man the sailing ships going to India and Africa. However, oil has yet to come to Oman, so that pearlers still leave the Trucial Coast in large numbers, and many Oman dhows from Sur still sail down to Africa.

White radishes	100	5
Lemons	40	5
Other fresh vegetables	400	15
10 live sheep	1100	40
15 live sheep and goats	1500	80
	Total Rs.	1502

It should be noted that rice constitutes one-third of the cost. The other great staple at sea—fish—is not listed accurately, as most of it is caught fresh; probably between two thousand and three thousand pounds of fresh fish was eaten. It should also be noted that no charge occurs for water. The dhow will take a tank of bad water rather than pay for it.

The Arab dhow, regardless of its size, always has a fish-line overboard, and it is not uncommon to see half a dozen lines overboard. I have caught many fish myself trailing a line from a dhow in the Persian Gulf. Villiers[88] states that fishing off the whole African coast is particularly good and that it is not uncommon for the many lines trailed from a Kuwait *bhum* to net twenty to thirty large fish a day. The fish not eaten are cleaned by splitting, are pounded in salt, and then hung in the sun to dry; the sailors never bother to scale the fish.

The galley on an Arab dhow is simply a spot on the deck. The stove consists simply of an open-sided box with some sand and cooking stones on the bottom (see Plate 21—top left). The larger the dhow the larger the fire-box. The cook cooks everything here with wood fires of palm wood, brush, or driftwood.

On dhows of South Arabia and the Gulf of Aden ports there is also a bread oven. I have never seen these on dhows from the Persian Gulf or Gulf of Oman. The oven consists of a wide-mouthed pot perhaps fifteen or eighteen inches in diameter; this pot is put inside a barrel about two and one-half or three feet in diameter and the space around the pot is filled with sand (see Plate 21—top right). The barrel is firmly lashed together and then is usually securely lashed to the deck. To bake bread, the cook builds a fire in the bottom of the pot and allows it to burn down to the coals. Then he takes a flat piece of dough like a large pancake and pastes this on the inside of the pot; the heat in the walls of the pot and the coals bake the bread. This is the Arab *khubuz*, one of the staples of the Arab at sea as well as on land.

VI

It is difficult for one totally unfamiliar with the Arab East to understand the economic system of the Arabs. The tenets of Islam prevent any

[88] A. Villiers, 55, p. 190.

4: Bowen C-5 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

banking system, interest, usury, or insurance. The economy of the Arabs is built on a tremendous pyramid of debt which has the lowly sailor, fisherman, farmer, and coolie on the base and a sheikh on top; this system, which may well be called the 'debt system,' operates efficiently and effectively, but has been notoriously overworked in the case of pearling activities in the Persian Gulf.

At the start, a merchant will finance a *nakhoda* for building a deepwater dhow.[56] Thus the *nakhoda* is the *nominal* owner of the dhow, but he is indebted to the merchant. If the *nakhoda* had enough money to buy a dhow himself, he would finance someone else and become a merchant himself. This arrangement suits the merchants, for if the ship goes down, the *nakhoda* (or his family) must pay back the value of the cargo and the cost of the dhow as well. Thus the merchant has an 'insurance' on his investment. A merchant may have a dozen *nakhodas* so indebted to him.

The *nakhoda*, on the other hand, has all his sailors and crew indebted to him. He never pays them any regular wages, but gives them advances of food and money when they need it. Thus, as we saw above, the sailors have to make the sails and rig a new ship if they are to sail it. Only when the voyage has terminated six months or a year later, and the ship has been beached in the home port, do the sailors get their share of the earnings of the voyage. But by this time many of them have no share coming, as the *nakhoda* usually has advanced them more than their share amounts to, so he must give them another advance; this is to the *nakhoda's* liking, as he then has the sailors indebted to him. Once a sailor owes a *nakhoda* money, the sailor cannot ship with another *nakhoda* until the debt is paid. The sailors pay for only half of what they eat, for when it comes to the final accounting (if such a civilized term can be applied to the figuring), the total food cost is subtracted from the gross earnings.

The *nakhoda* receives about four or five times the sailors' share, while the mate receives about half as much as the *nakhoda*; some members of the crew receive a little more than the common sailors. The shares received by the twenty-seven men eligible for shares on the Kuwait *bhum* on which Villiers[57] sailed in 1939 are as follows:

	Value of Share	*Number of Shares*	*Total Shares*
Nakhoda (captain)	5	1	5
Mu'allim (mate)	3	1	3
Quartermaster	1½	3	4½

[56] Not everyone can become a *nakhoda*, for the *nakhoda* must come from a family which can pay the debt if the *nakhoda* should be unable to.

[57] A. Villiers, *SS*, p. 425.

4: Bowen C-5 (1960) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

426
465

Serang (boatswain)	1½		1½
Serang's mate	1¼	1	1¼
Cook	1½	1	1½
Steward (storekeeper)	1¼	1	1¼
Sailors	1	18	18
Total shares			36
Nakhoda's extra 4 and mate's extra 2 shares			6
Net shares for crew's half of dhow's earnings			30

The *nakhoda's* four and the mate's two extra shares are taken from the ship's part of the earnings. On the voyage that Villiers made, the ship grossed 9,600 rupees and spent some 1,500 rupees on foodstuffs; this gave a net earning of 8,100 rupees. Half of this was considered the crew's share for the voyage, so the thirty shares were worth 135 rupees each (after the *nakhoda's* and the mate's extra six shares were deducted from the total shares). The ship's expenses and upkeep, as well as the *nakhoda's* and the mate's extra shares, came from the dhow's earnings; the balance went to the merchant financing the vessel. If we assume that the yearly upkeep of the dhow was 1,000 rupees (which it never would be, as the crew does all the work on their share of the earnings), the owner's share on his investment of 12,500 rupees (the total original cost of the completed dhow) was 2,240 rupees, or approximately eighteen per cent. However, this is probably closer to twenty per cent, as the yearly upkeep probably did not run over 500 rupees. This would not hold up under strict accounting, as no depreciation has been charged off. Also no insurance on hull or cargo was carried as there are few if any Arab insurance firms. However, when Arab craft make return trips from India they usually insure the cargo with an Indian firm.

Villiers[28] estimates that the sailors might have netted twenty rupees extra in their own trading, that the mate might have made several hundred, while the *nakhoda* might have made a thousand rupees in his deals —mostly from Persian rugs and carved chests. Thus the owner received a twenty per cent return on his investment for the year, while the sailors received about 150 rupees ($45.00) then for a year's work. That seems rather unbalanced, does it not?

I have found the same general system of shares applying to pearling and fishing activities as well as to mariners in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and along the coasts of South Arabia. In general, however, it is more

[28] Ibid., p. 426.

4: Bowen C-5 (1960) 1961 MK2 Maritime Arab MK2

clean-cut in Villiers' case, as all the shares of the *nakhoda* and the mate come from the crew's half of the net earnings. On the 240-ton *sambuk El Wafi*, which I boarded in Aden in 1950, the shares were as follows:[88]

	Value of Share	*Number of Shares*	*Total Shares*
Nakhoda (captain)	4	1	4
Serang (mate)	2	1	2
Sukkani (quartermaster or helmsman)	1½	3	4½
Muqaddam (boatswain)	1¼	1	1¼
Katib (clerk)	1½	1	1½
Wakil (steward)	1¼	1	1¼
Bakri or *mallah* (sailors)	1	33	33
Total shares			47½

In India some crews are paid on a salary basis, but many others work on a share basis. However, in India the owner takes one-third of whatever the ship earns. Then the craft's expenses while she was at sea and the supplies for the crew are deducted from the remaining two-thirds; the remainder is then divided among the captain and crew according to shares.[89] By dividing the profits in this manner the Indian owner gets about a quarter less than the Arab, while the Indian crew gets about ten per cent more.

The largest importer and exporter in Aden, and probably the whole Gulf of Aden for that matter, is A. Besse and Company, operated by a shrewd Frenchman, Mr. Antone Besse. Among Besse's various holdings in the Middle East are twelve dhows, all registered in Aden. The *El Wafi* was one of the twelve *sambuks* owned by A. Besse, and operated in the Gulf of Aden and the lower Red Sea. On the average these dhows made four trips a month. The *nakhoda* was given advances, which he in turn gave to the crew, before each trip. After four trips the gross return for

[88] It will be noted that the Arabic names in Villiers' list of the members of the crew on a Kuwait *bhum* and in my list of the members of the crew of an Aden *sambuk* are not the same; however, this does not mean that either is necessarily wrong. The Arabic names on my list were checked from three independent sources in Aden, and my informants in Aden recognized Villiers' *mu'allim* as the word the Kuwaiti used for 'mate.' Villiers indicated on his list 'quartermaster' but did not give the Arabic for the word. The Arabic word that I found in use in Aden for this member of the crew was *sukkani*, which comes from *sukkan*, the Arabic for 'rudder.' Thus it would seem that the more proper translation of the word is 'rudder-man' or 'helmsman,' although his position on the dhow is really that of 'quartermaster.' The word *muqaddam* is the word commonly used on land to refer to a 'headman' who is the leader of any other group of working-men. However, on a dhow the *muqaddam* is the man who superintends the letting go and the weighing of the anchor, so the translation of the word when applied to seafaring men is properly 'boatswain.' The important fact evident from the two lists is that there is always a consistency in the top officers of a dhow—there are a captain, a mate, three quartermasters (or helmsmen), and a boatswain, irrespective of the Arabic names by which they are known.

[89] K. B. Vaidya, op. cit., p. 41.

4, Bowen C-6 (1960) 1961 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

the cargo the dhow had hauled was figured and the cost of the food consumed by the officers and crew was deducted, giving the net earning of the dhow. One-half belonged to the crew and was divided into forty-seven and one-half shares as shown above. The other half belonged to the owner, and represented his return on his investment; the owner had to maintain the dhows from his half of the earnings. As we saw above in the case of the figures presented by Villiers, the owner has little to deduct from his share of the ship's earnings, so his return on his investment is considerable. It is little wonder that Mr. A. Besse was recently able to give Oxford University a contribution of £2,000,000!

Over one hundred years ago, the French Admiral F. E. Paris spent considerable time in the waters around Muscat and wondered how Arab ships could at that time compete with the more efficient European sailing ships. Paris summed up his conclusions as follows:

> ... les Arabs qui les montent habitués au retour périodique des moussons, n'exécutent, en general, qu'un voyage par an ... [ils] entendent bien le commerce; malgré cela, ils sont rarement employés par les Europeans ... et, comme ils ne prennent que de très-faibles cargaisons, ce n'est que grâce à l'extrême économie des Arabs qu'ils peuvent servir pour le commerce.[41]

Only a decade ago, one hundred years after Paris, men of other lands were still wondering how an Arab sailing fleet could possibly survive in the present era of oil and steam; to satisfy his curiosity Alan Villiers dedicated a year of his life to sailing with the Arabs in their dhows. Villiers has summed up the reasons for the survival of the dhow fleet as follows:

> One reason—perhaps the chief—why the ancient trade with the monsoons down the Indian Ocean not only survives but flourishes is that the dhows warehouse the goods they carry as well as transport them, and it suits the merchants better to have 10,000 packages of new season's dates divided among a fleet of dhows, than in the hold of one steamer which will unload the lot in a day or two, and flood the market. Ten thousand packages provide cargoes for at least five large dhows; the dhow master does not care how long he takes to discharge his cargo, for his overheads are trifling, his crew works on shares and handles all cargo, and his vessel pays practically no port dues.[42]

While in Aden in 1950, the writer investigated the intriguing problem of dhow economics, as applied to the coastal craft operating around

[41] F. E. Paris, *Essai sur la Construction Navale des Peuples Extra-Européens* (Paris, Bertrand, [1841]), p. 9. '... the Arabs who man them, accustomed to the periodic reversal of the monsoons, carry out, in general only one voyage a year ... they understand commerce well; in spite of that, they are rarely employed by Europeans ... and, as they carry only very poor cargoes, it is only because of the extreme economy of the Arabs that they can be of use for commerce.'

[42] A. Villiers, 'The Arab Dhow Trade,' *Middle East Journal*, II (1948), 400-401.

4: Bowen C-5 (1950) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

craft furnish the only transportation to many small off-the-track ports. In addition to this it must be remembered that the dhow (or other native coastal craft) can navigate shallow harbors and creeks, while a steamer could not get closer than several miles. Thus there will always be a place for these short range coasters. However, the future of the deepwater dhow is another question.

The debt system has worked for centuries to the economic advantage of those financing the dhows, and to the economic disadvantage of those working on them. It has been impossible for the sailors to break away, as they can never work for another *nakhoda* when in debt to one. There is only one way to break away, and that is to pay the debt. Becoming a farmer or a fisherman does not help, as they usually operate under the debt system also.

On its face in such a financial set-up the merchant has everything to gain and absolutely nothing to lose. In the case above (where the shares, and thus the sailors' wage, were worth about 150 rupees and the merchant made eighteen per cent on his investment on the dhow), if the dhow had made only one-half of what it had, the merchant would still have received about ten per cent on his investment, but the poor sailors would have received only 75 rupees ($22.50) as a year's wage. Thus the dhow can compete against steam only at a sacrifice of the unfortunate economic slaves sailing the dhow. The dhow sailors do all the stevedoring, maintenance work, and sailing for their lowly share of the dhow's earnings; if the sailors received a decent wage (even if only on Eastern standards), the deepwater dhow could not stay afloat as a cargo vessel. Coastal craft operating short distances do pay higher wages on the average than the deepwatermen.

However, the advent of the large oil companies in the Middle East has provided a means wherein the sailors can escape from the bonds of economic slavery. By making jobs which pay good money (on Eastern standards) dhow sailors are able to free themselves of their debts and become free men. We have seen above that the oil companies in Saudi Arabia and on Bahrein Island have decreased the number of boats the pearl fisheries can send out, as they cannot get divers to work for the wage they can offer. Kuwait has long been able to keep a large deepwater cargo fleet of *bhums* on the waters around the Indian Ocean because Kuwait had a surplus of cheap labor—there was little else to do in Kuwait besides work in marine activities. Now that the Kuwait Oil Company has made jobs available to the local Arabs, the cheap labor market is gone for the Kuwait *nakhodas*. Thus as the standard of living is increased and cheap labor

4: Bowen C-5 (1960) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

426 465 505 becomes no longer available, the deepwater dhow is doomed. The dhow cannot operate in competition with steam if it has to pay the sailors respectable wages; that is, as long as the merchants demand one-half of the dhow earnings.

511 While traffic in human cargo is virtually a thing of the past, the dhows that coast along the Arabian, African, and Indian shores still have slave crews on them. Although not owned bodily, the crews are bound economically to their masters, the *nakhodas*, while the *nakhodas* themselves are economic slaves of the merchants. But, while the crews get little actual compensation when the pay-off finally comes, they are happy and well-fed and have known nothing else. Allah is compassionate, and there is always a Paradise waiting for their poor souls!

5: Harrison D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 M1 Middle East
Maritime Arabs MK2

From the proceeds of the season's catch one-fifth is 427
turned over to the owner of the boat as rent for its use, 465
and from the remainder the season's expenses for food, 228
water and the like are deducted. The money that is left 466
represents the profits of the season. Each diver receives an equal share of this; each assistant two-thirds of a share. The captain, who has done no diving but has superintended the season's campaign, receives a diver's share, as does the sheikh of the town in some instances, this being the government tax upon the industry.

This seems a good system. In theory it could hardly be improved, but in practice it could hardly be worse. The divers cannot read or write, so they have no way [212]
of knowing whether or not their accounts are correctly kept. They may not assist in, or even witness, the process of sale, so they have not the slightest control over the captain, nor any means of protecting themselves from dishonesty on his part. The captain himself is between the upper and nether millstones, for the only way he can rent a diving boat is by promising to sell his pearls to the owner of that boat, and from this owner he may receive not over fifty per cent of their market price. Even this reduced price the divers do not receive undiminished, for the captain enriches himself privately at their expense before the sale is reported. Then as if matters were not bad enough, almost without exception the men are in their captain's debt, and remain so throughout their lives.

The fact that nearly all the divers are in debt is partly 426
their own fault. When a man begins to dive, he could [465]
avoid borrowing money if he were at all determined to do
so. The diving season lasts only five months at the out- 466
side, and the season's proceeds may be sufficient to live on for the whole year with economy and care. If they

5: Harrison D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 M1 Middle East
Maritime Arabs Mk2

426 are not, work can be found to tide over the winter months.
466 That, however, is not the usual course of events. The boy who has five hundred *rupees* in his pocket for the first time in his life is eager to have a good time. Inside of a month or two all the money is gone. The captain encourages this procedure, and assures the boy that he will gladly lend him any amount desired. The one thing that the captain desires is to lend this new diver some money, and his zeal to make himself accommodating and friendly is sometimes quite ludicrous. With most of his new men, unfortunately, there is little difficulty. The season's proceeds are gone inside of a few weeks, and before the winter is over, the diver is in debt for an amount equal to the sum he earned, or quite possibly even greater.

The diver is now a slave for the rest of his life. It is probably easier for a negro slave on the Pirate Coast to escape than it is for a Bahrein diver to regain his freedom. As long as he is in debt he cannot change his employer, no matter how badly he is treated, nor can he leave the town except under bonds to return before the diving season begins. And he never will be able to get out of debt. He cannot read or write. There is no witness to the transactions that take place between the captain and himself. It is the recognized thing for divers to receive a loan of rice when the season begins, so that their families may have something to eat while the head of the house is away. The sum written into the books is regularly about fifty per cent greater than the market price of the rice. If necessary, entirely false entries are written in. The upshot of the matter is that these men never get out of debt, not one in a thousand of them. In seven years' residence in Bahrein, I have never yet met a diver

5: Harrison D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 M1 Middle East
Maritime Arabs MK2

who had "escaped from the account book," as the Arabs put it.

The amount that a season's work brings in is now a matter of indifference. However great it may be all that happens is that the sum is written to the diver's credit on the books, and he is given an advance when he asks for it and the captain is willing to allow it. There are certain times during the year when it is the custom to give these advances—the beginning and the close of the diving season and once or twice during the idle months. A good season means somewhat more liberal advances and a bad season smaller ones. The diver, however, is absolutely at the captain's mercy in all this. As a matter of fact he gets in ordinary years an amount that is sufficient for life, and a more comfortable life than that of the Bedouin. The diver's standards of life, however, are considerably below those of a date gardener in a good oasis. It is to the captain's interest, of course, to have his men more or less well fed and satisfied, and to have the glamour of pearl diving maintained so that others will be attracted to the work, so a great show is made of calculating the season's receipts and the rare man who is not in debt really does get a fairly liberal reward for the season's exhausting labor. The crucial point, of course, is the law that prevents a mistreated and dissatisfied diver from changing his employer or from changing his residence. The captain could afford to give his men an amount that would allow them a considerably better mode of life. Doubtless if public sentiment becomes too threatening, he will do so. The thing he will not do is to consent to any alteration of the law that at present delivers the debtor into his hands,

6: Harrison D-4 (1919-1924) 1924 MI Middle East
Maritime Arabs M

466 body and soul. The one redeeming feature of the system
466 is that debts are not transmissible from father to son and theoretically each boy starts out with a clean slate, but too often the filial loyalty of the son is appealed to and he assumes his father's debts. This plan allows the old man to retire from his life of hardship. Nothing suits the captain better, for thus the boy is deprived of his only chance to keep free from the slavery that has bound his father.

465 But in spite of its financial drawbacks the work has a great fascination for the Arab, and this is largely because of its element of chance. The Oriental is an inveterate gambler, and the Arab is no exception. Some years the reward of an individual diver may be next to nothing. Another season he may make a thousand *rupees*, or about three hundred and fifty dollars. Over night the whole aspect of the season may change. A pearl worth fifty thousand *rupees* may be discovered at any time. The largest pearl sold locally during the past ten years brought one hundred and twenty thousand *rupees*. Arabs tell of boats whose divers have cleared over two thousand *rupees* or more in a season, but such mythical individuals are hard to find. It is far easier to find the man who has failed to make two *rupees*. However, to do the industry justice, such individuals are rare also. In fair seasons the average must lie somewhere between three hundred and seven hundred *rupees*, or one hundred to two hundred and fifty dollars.

465 At the end of the season the profit, such as it is, is re-
517 ported and the money divided. The divers each receive their share, and the assistants each two-thirds of a share. Men in debt receive a more or less liberal allowance, and the town is filled with rejoicing divers who have just re-

5: Harrison D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 M1 Middle East Maritime Arabs Mkg

The larger ports of Kuwait, Bahrein and Dibai have also a large community of artisans and lesser merchants. These serve not simply the local diving population, but also act as manufacturers and wholesalers for the whole of Central Arabia. Practically the entire import and export trade for the interior of the peninsula goes through these three towns, and the merchant and artisan communities are large and prosperous.

It is difficult to be optimistic about the general situation in these pearl-diving communities. The actual material condition of the divers is bad enough, but worse by far is the discouragement and despair that have settled down upon the whole community. No one tries very hard to get out of debt, for he knows that barring some unforeseen miracle, he cannot do so no matter how long and hard he works and how economically he lives. There is little thrift; a stranger is often shocked by the waste that divers show in their personal and household expenditures. There is not the slightest effort, for instance, to discover what sort of clothing will give the most service for the money invested. Expensive or cheap, economical or wasteful, it is all the same. With luck when the present supply of money is gone, the captain will make another liberal allowance, and nothing better than that can be hoped for, no matter what economy and thrift are practised.

The conditions outlined above are those that obtain in the northern towns, chiefly in Bahrein. There is a second large diving community in the region known as the Pirate Coast, whose capital and largest city is Dibai. Its piratical character is a matter of history now long past, but it still makes a good deal of trouble for the British who police the Gulf and maintain order along the coast.